

Even the Slightest Chance

by drewbug

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Summary: Mulder faces old demons and an unexpected illness while on an X-file in Green River, Utah

Even the Slightest Chance

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Disclaimer: You know the drill. Any of the characters you recognize are not mine. (Though, if someone wanted to give them to meâ€œ I'm very good at accepting gifts.) No infringement was intended by drawing them into my little world for a while.

Author's Note: Please forgive all gross medical, geographical, and temporal inaccuracies. I admit it: I don't know everything. If anyone reading this lives in or is in any way related to Green River, Utah, my apologies for the somewhat unflattering remarks. I had a bad experience there onceâ€œ This is my own little revenge. I have changed the specific names of places to protect myself from lawsuits.

I'd love to get some comments on this one. This is my first attempt at writing X-Files (I usually stick to Star Trek), so I'd like to hear how it worked out. Any comments (good or bad) will be welcomeâ€œ

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Even the Slightest Chance

By Nicole Clevenger ([perfect\\_kiss@juno.com](mailto:perfect_kiss@juno.com))

Â© 1997

3:30 AM

Sunday

Alexandria, Virginia

Mulder's Apartment

He bolted upright as the ringing of the phone cut through his light sleep. A bleary glance at his watch told him that it probably wasn't a social call. Who would be calling him? Unless it was trouble. Scully?

Instantly awake, he grabbed the phone, hitting the mute button on the remote control. On the screen a glass unicorn revolved in silence. "Scully?"

"Agent Mulder?" The voice on the other end was not feminine as he had expected, but that was not necessarily a good sign. This person could be calling to tell him that she was in trouble, that she was in the hospital, that she wasâ€¦

\*Calm down, Mulder. Get a grip. Listen to what the man has to say.\*  
"Speaking. Who is this?"

The voice on the other end was barely above a whisper. "You received a file yesterday. Things are not as they seem, Mr. Mulder."

Relieved to find that this had nothing to do with his partner, he almost rolled his eyes. The lines, the guy's hushed toneâ€¦it could have come straight out of a bad mystery novel. He suspected that someone was playing games with him, and he wasn't finding it very funny. He rubbed his eyes. "I get a lot of files. My desk is about to collapse under the weight of all the paper on top of it. Could you be more specific, perhaps?"

"Green River. Utah."

He ran through his mind the files he had looked at that day. He hadn't gotten through all of them, and none of them he'd seen had any relation to Utah. "What about it?"

"You have to go there, Mr. Mulder."

"Is this an insomniac missionary with the Church of Latter Day Saints?" he quipped.

"There are secrets there. Secrets will be hidden forever if you don't uncover them soon."

"Who is this?" he asked again, becoming vaguely annoyed. If this guy didn't start giving him some specifics soon, he was going to hang up. "How did you get this number?"

"Secrets reveal answers. The answers will lead you to Samantha." The man hung up.

Mulder felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. "Where is she?" he yelled into the phone. "Where is my sister? Who the hell are you?" His only answer was the dial tone. For a moment after he pulled the phone away from his ear he just sat there staring at it, as if the hunk on plastic and computer parts could tell him what was happening.

\*Samâ€| \*

---

\_The answers will lead you to Samantha\_â€|

//A bright light, whispering voices. He is paralyzed, unable even to cry out, forced to watch as they take her...//

He let the phone fall beside him on the black leather of the couch. His breath was coming in fast pants, and he forced himself to take deeper breaths. Slowly his heart stopped racing, and his mind began to clear. Then he remembered the rest of the conversation, the part about the file. Green River, Utah. That's where he had to go, just as soon as he found that file. Mulder, still wearing the white T-shirt and jeans that he had fallen asleep in, quickly pulled on his socks and tennis shoes. He found his car keys, cell phone, and his lightweight navy blue jacket, and he left his apartment, barely remembering to lock the door behind him.

7:04 AM

Sunday

Scully's Apartment

Scully's hand missed the phone the first time she reached for it. The second time she opened one eye, and managed to grab the receiver with just a little concentration. She had been sleeping soundly, dreaming about her father. They had been sitting on the porch together, just talking, telling each other all the little things they hadn't gotten a chance to share before he died. He had been right in the middle of a story about the time that he and Margaret Scully had been snowed in at the cabin in the woods without any supplies, whenâ€|

"Scully," she mumbled into the phone.

"Hi, Scully, it's me." As if she expected anyone else to be calling this early on her day off. She squinted at the digital bedside clock. Okay, so it wasn't that early, but she had the right to sleep in once in a while, like everybody else.

"Yes, Mulder. What do you want?" She really didn't care if she sounded a little peevish. \*Here it comes. He's going to tell me he wants to fly to some remote end of the earth to chase something or otherâ€| Anyone else would have the decency to at least let me drink a cup of coffee firstâ€|\*

"Can you be ready in an hour?" She almost groaned aloud when her suspicions were proven true. "We have a new case."

"Where are we going this time?" she asked, already knowing that she would be showered, dressed, and packed by the time he came to pick her up. As annoying as he could be, he was her partner. If he needed herâ€|

"Utah," came the reply. "I'll explain on the way. Plane leaves at nine. I'll be there to pick you up by eight. Okay?"

Scully sighed softly, looking at the clock. "Okay, Mulder. I'll be

here."

8:22 AM

Sunday

Scully's Apartment

She looked at her watch again, wondering where he could be. It wasn't Mulder's style to always be prompt, but stillâ€| \*Come on, Mulder, we're going to miss our flightâ€| \* Not that it was anything new. She hated being the last ones on board, mumbling apologies to irritated flight attendants who had been forced to keep irate passengers happy while holding the plane for two tardy FBI agents. Then came the part where she and Mulder had to search for their seats, bearing up under glares from the impatient people who had been kept waiting for their arrival. And, of course, Mulder never seemed to notice.

A car horn sounded outside, and Scully moved quickly to the window. Mulder's car, all right; she grabbed her bags and headed out the front door. Within minutes she was outside and getting into his car, preparing to give him hell. But he beat her to it.

"Sorry, Scully, I know I'm late."

She glanced at him. "We're going to miss our flight, Mulder," was all she said.

He shook his head, keeping his eyes on the road. "I think we can make it. There shouldn't be much traffic. But I called and asked them to hold the plane for us, just in case."

\*Great. Just what I was hoping he'd sayâ€| \*

But Mulder's driving implied that he had no intention of getting to the airport late. Scully fought the urge to grab the steering wheel from him as he sped along the freeway, narrowly missing a dark blue Saturn while changing lanes. Instead she grit her teeth and held onto the door handle, as if that would save her if he plowed into the back of someone's car at 85 mph. She frantically tried to remember if this car had both driver and passenger side airbags.

Brake lights began to appear in front of them, and Mulder was forced to reduce his speed to a near crawl. Scully let out a slow relieved breath, having easily decided that she'd rather do the Airplane March of Embarrassment than be killed in a high-speed collision while racing to make the flight on time.

Scully looked over at her partner, noticing for the first time how tired he seemed. "Are you all right, Mulder?"

Mulder blinked and rubbed his eyes, as if pulling himself out of a daydream. He flashed her a weary smile. "Yeah. I just didn't get much sleep last night." She was tempted to ask him how much sleep he'd gotten in the last few days. However, he immediately changed the subject â€" in true Mulder fashion â€" nodding toward her feet. "The case file is on the floor there."

She reached down and picked up the thin manila folder. Mulder kept

his eyes on the cars in front of him, driving slowly with the traffic flow. Scully flipped through the material while Mulder summarized.

"Antha Wood and Morgan Carmichael, both, until their death, residents of the small town of Green River, Utah. Both seventeen years old, both juniors at the nearby River High." As he spoke, Scully compared the pictures of the two girls. Antha was blond, curls framing her delicate features and wide blue eyes that made her look far younger than seventeen. Her skin was so smooth and pale that it made Scully think of a porcelain doll that her mother had, a momento from her own childhood. Scully hadn't been very interested in dolls growing upâ€¦though, looking back, she knew that her mother had hoped to give it to her. A ritual of passing something down along family lines that the young, stubborn Dana Scully had refused to recognize. She wondered vaguely if her mother still had that doll.

Morgan, on the other hand, looked to be Antha's total opposite, at least in physical appearance. Her hair was dark and very straight, her eyes a brilliant green. She had elegantly high cheekbones, which immediately caught the eye's attention, and she probably could have passed for eighteen or nineteen. And whereas Antha looked rather shy in her photograph â€" almost as if she wanted to hide from the camera â€" Morgan's eyes seemed to hold a glint of something. Mischief? Rebellion? Scully wondered when these two pictures were taken.

"Antha was reported missing first," Mulder continued. "Three days later, she was found just outside of town, reportedly delirious and generally incoherent. She was taken to the closest hospital where she was treated for severe dehydration and malnutrition. Apparently she had unexplained puncture wounds all over her body, but very little blood loss. Despite all efforts, she died the next morning. That afternoon, Morgan was reported missing by her mother. Again, three days later, she turned up in almost exactly the same spot as Antha. Same symptoms, though she seemed to be a bit more lucid, according to the doctor's reports. She managed to live for a full day before mysteriously dying as Antha did. That was two days ago. No one else has been reported missing. Yet."

Scully glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. "Yet?"

Mulder shrugged. "It's a small town, but there's a scattering of houses around the area. It's possible that another girl has been taken, but it has yet to be reported to the local police. Speaking of which, we're scheduled to meet Sheriff Jim Winters as soon as we get into town."

"Has anyone done an autopsy on these girls?"

"That's to be your pleasure, Dr. Scully. Morgan Carmichael's body is at the county morgue, waiting for your scrutiny."

"And Antha Wood's?"

Mulder frowned as he turned into the airport long-term parking lot. "Her parents refused to wait. She was buried two days after she died."

\*Can't say that I blame them\* Scully thought. She closed the file and

tucked it into her carry-on bag to read during the four hour flight to Utah. A quick look at her watch told her that they might actually be on time for this flight, despite the last-minute traffic. She picked up her suitcases and followed Mulder into the airport.

11:54 AM (EST)

Sunday

TWA Flight 317

Scully sat back in the seat, taking off her glasses and massaging the bridge of her nose. On the fold-down tray in front of her sat the open file. She'd been reading through what little information there was since takeoff, and she was having trouble figuring out why Mulder was so interested in this case. Yes, the disappearances and deaths of the two girls did have some mystery to them. But, looking over the facts that they had, she wouldn't really call this an X-File. Maybe Mulder knew something that he wasn't telling her.

Scully looked at her partner. His six-foot frame seemed too large for the small space it was in, and she knew he couldn't possibly be comfortable. But he had managed to fall asleep somehow, for which she was glad. She knew Mulder had a difficult time sleeping nights, constantly plagued by nightmares. He didn't like to talk about it, but she had often seen the results in his fatigue-lined face when he showed up at the office. He needed any chance he got to actually rest; her questions about the case could wait.

She stretched her legs, grateful that she was a lot smaller than Mulder. She wouldn't exactly describe the area she had as spacious, but at least she had room to stretch out a little. She still felt a little cramped, though, and she wished that the government would pay to send them first class for once.

\*In your dreams, Dana.\*

"Would you like something to drink, Ma'am?"

Scully almost jumped; she hadn't heard the attendant's approach. Immediately she closed the file, before turning to the waiting woman. "A Diet Coke would be wonderful. Thank you." The attendant nodded and moved off after a quick glance at Mulder told her she didn't need to ask him.

Scully opened the file again and looked down at the page she had been reading. It hadn't been confidentiality she had been concerned with; she had wanted to prevent the woman from seeing these particular photographs. They were the coroner's pictures of the two bodies, graphically depicting the bruises and puncture wounds that had been found on both girls. \*No one should see this kind of thing\* she thought. \*Not unless they have to.\*

11:42 AM (MST)

Sunday

En route to Green River

The road seemed to go on forever. There was nothing to be seen on

either side of the straight two-lane highway except dirt. Flat dirt. And she couldn't even see much of that, since the rain was coming down so hard.

As soon as they had reclaimed their luggage, they had gotten a rental car and reconfirmed their directions. The bored-looking woman at the Hertz counter had informed them that it was at least an hour's drive to get to Green River, Utah, probably longer in the rain. Then she had asked them why they where headed there, in a tone of voice that suggested that no one in their right mind would intentionally plan to end up in that town. Scully briefly considered hopping right back on a plane headed for DC, leaving Mulder here to run around in the rain alone.

Of course, she had stayed right where she was. Not only that, she had volunteered to drive. Mulder still looked exhausted, and she hoped that he would use the opportunity to sleep some more. Though she had been a little surprised when he had handed her the keys. Mulder never let her drive.

Now, trying not to drift off from total boredom, she almost wished he had insisted on driving. Or at least had stayed awake to talk to her. At the rental car desk she had asked for a map, but the woman had merely laughed. "Honey, you don't need a map. Just stay on the same road for an hour or so. The biggest risk is that you'll drive right through the town and not even know it!" Scully vaguely entertained the idea that she might have done just that. It certainly seemed like she'd been driving for more than an hour!

Next to her, Mulder shifted position in his sleep. She glanced over at him, figuring that she could safely drive this empty stretch of road even without looking where she was going for a few seconds. He was turned away from her, his head leaning against his closed window. There was a thin sheen of sweat across his forehead, and she frowned slightly. Then she noticed that he did still have his jacket on, and she had had the car's heater on since they pulled out of the rental car parking lot. Turning her eyes back to the road, she reached for the heater controls.

His voice stopped her hand. "You don't have to do that," he mumbled.

She didn't look at him, instead completing the motion and turning down the heat. "Always thinking of yourself, Mulder?" she teased lightly. "Maybe I'm getting warm in here."

"Oh. Okay."

She was about to say something about his lack of a witty comeback when a building suddenly came into view. A garage, it looked like, appearing out of the rain like an apparition. But as she slowed to pass it, more buildings became visible through the rain, lining the side of what had become one wide paved road. She wondered where the highway had disappeared to.

\*Oh God, is this it?\*

Next to her, Mulder straightened up in his seat. "Looks like we're here, Scully."

"You've got to be kidding," she muttered.

Their investigations had taken them to some small towns before, but this was borderline ridiculous. From what she could tell, Green River constituted mainly of one long main street, a couple of car garages, and a whole lot of motels. Now the receptionist's words began to make sense. Green River was not a place one would choose as a vacation destination. No, it looked more like a place where the family car would be towed to after dying on the road on the way to a vacation spot. Impossible to imagine that someone would want to live here. A nowhere in the middle of nowhere.

Well, at least they wouldn't have to worry about finding a place to stay.

Mulder directed her to the sheriff's office, a small building at the other end of town. As they got out of the car and opened their umbrellas, Scully thought that she could see the point they entered the town â€“ if it could even be called that. One long main street that wasn't even that long.

"At least you won't have to worry about getting lost," Mulder said into her ear.

She bit back the caustic response waiting on her tongue as a man in a sheriff's uniform came up to them. He was taller than Scully, but not by much. Though his hair was beginning to gray at the temples, she guessed that he wasn't over forty-five. Gentle blue eyes surrounded by lines that indicated that he was often squinting. She wondered if he wore glasses. There were also plenty of "laugh lines" around his mouth. He struck her as someone who enjoyed what he did, and who was rarely morose. Now, however, seemed to be one of those rare moments.

"Are you the FBI agents?" he asked. The voice was deep, deeper than she'd expected. But not unkind. This man gave off the impression of geniality. At their nods, he introduced himself. "I'm Jim Winters. Welcome to Green River. Though I wish you could have come under happier circumstances, I'll say."

"I'm Agent Dana Scully," she said, reaching to shake his outstretched hand. "And this is Agent Fox Mulder." Mulder inclined his head in acknowledgement. "We have some questions. How would you like to â€“ ?"

"Well, I thought maybe you two would be hungry. How 'bout we discuss this all over lunch?" He indicated the diner across the street. "Best chili fries this side of the Mississippi." Scully wondered if this man had even been east of the Mississippi, or if he was simply quoting the restaurant's somewhat unoriginal promotion. But she was getting hungry. She glanced at her watch, which reminded her that she had yet to change it for this time zone.

"Sounds fine to me," she said with a polite smile. \*Anything to get out of this rain.\* "Mulder?"

"Can't pass up an offer like that," Mulder said. Winters smiled at that. \*Good job, Mulder. Never hurts to get on their good side.\*

Soon the trio was seated at a booth next to the big front window. Their order came up in record time, and Scully suspected a bit of favoritism on the part of the kitchen staff. \*How could there not be, in a town as small as this? Hell, Sheriff Winters probably has dinner at their families' houses once a week. And the rest of the time he probably eats here.\* It would probably make their job a lot easier too, if people knew that they were on the same side as the friendly local law enforcement.

Most of what Winters was saying had been in the file. Scully listened at half-attention while running through the questions she wanted to ask when he was finished. She noticed that Mulder hadn't really eaten anything that was on the plate in front of him. \*That's odd. Mulder usually loves this kind of greasy fried stuff.\* Scully glanced down at her plate, trying not to think about what all of this was doing to her arteries.

"Sheriff Winters, have you had any reports of UFO sightings in this area?"

Scully's head jerked up at the question, her eyes throwing invisible daggers in Mulder's direction. \*He's going to kill our credibility before we even have the chance to do anything!\*

Winters laughed so hard she thought he was going to choke on his soda. "UFOs, Agent Mulder?" He looked over at Scully. "Is he serious?"

Scully decided to ignore the question, attempting to change the subject with a question of her own. "Was there any indication that these girls were being followed before their abductions?"

The laughter left the man's face again. "No, not that we know of."

"I assume you've spoken to classmates, friends of the girls?" He nodded. She could feel Mulder practically glaring at her for changing the track of the conversation, but she continued on. "We'll need the names of everyone who's stayed at the motels in town since the time of the first abduction."

"Okay."

"And I'd like to do the autopsy on Morgan Carmichael as soon as possible today." \*So that the parents can have some peace\* she added silently.

"I can take you as soon as we're done here." An impossibly thin man in a white apron came out of the kitchen area. He caught Winters' eye and waved him over. The sheriff stood up. "Excuse me for a minute, will you?"

Alone, Scully turned to her partner sitting beside her. "Alright, what's this about? Why are we here?"

"We're investigating a crime, Scully. Two of them, in fact."

She frowned at him. "Come on, Mulder. I looked over this case file on the plane. It doesn't strike me as something that would normally attract your attention. Unless there's something that you're not

telling me about." Her look told him that he wasn't going to get away until he spilled his secret.

He sighed, as if admitting defeat. "I got a phone call last night. A man told me to take this case. He said there was more to this than meets the eye. 'Secrets,' he said."

"So now you're going to go jump on a plane every time some stranger calls you up and tells you to?" There was something more, something else that he wasn't saying.

Mulder shrugged. "Two unexplained deaths, following mysterious abductions. I think that's worth our time, Scully." His eyes moved to the sheriff talking to the other man over the counter.

"Mulder, look at this place. Half the town is a motel. Isn't it likely that someone simply came through here, got a room, and kidnapped those girls? He could have hid them right in town, holding them for a few days before leaving them practically right outside the door. He's probably long gone."

He turned back to her. "Maybe, but I don't think so. First, there was the phone call. And both girls were held for three days, which is a..." He broke off abruptly as Winters returned. Obviously Mulder wasn't ready to share his theory just yet.

Winters smiled at them both. "Ready to go?"

Mulder stood and pulled out his wallet, but Winters shook his head. "Already taken care of, Agent Mulder."

Mulder thanked him and moved out of the way so that Scully could slide out of the booth. "Scully, I'll meet you at the morgue."

"Where will you be?"

"I'm going to have a look at the site where the two girls were returned."

1:26 PM

Sunday

He crouched behind the garage fence, searching the mud for any clues. Trouble was, he didn't know what he was looking for, really. Sure, if his theory was correct, there might be several things he would find in the area where the girls were found. Or there might be none. That was the trouble with alien abductions. Sometimes the evidence was hard to come by.

\*Sometimes? Isn't that a little optimistic, Mulder?\*

His head was pounding, and he was wet. The rain had slowed to a mere drizzle, but it was still coming down. He should have brought the other umbrella, he knew, but he hadn't intended on staying out here that long. Not to mention that he had completely forgotten about it until Scully had driven off in the car.

\*Surprised Scully didn't remember. Isn't that what she's here for? To

keep me in line?\*

Sure seemed that way sometimes. But he was grateful for itâ€|who knows how many times he would have ended up dead without her around to take care of him. Now, if only she would let him do the same for herâ€|

He didn't know why he had only told her about half of the phone conversation. He had left out the part about Samantha on purpose, that was certain, but he didn't really know why. \*Maybe because then she'd really think you were losing it. She already thinks it's bad enough that you took this case because of a phone call, but if she knew that you were out here because you really hoped to findâ€|\*

Mulder mentally shrugged off the train of thought and tried to concentrate on what he was doing. Not that there was probably anything left to find here, what with all the rain that had been drenching the area. He absently scratched an itch on the back of his wrist as he looked around him. This was the spot, Winters had assured him. And he had said that he doubted many people had been through here, after his team had done that first search for evidence when they found the girls. So if there was anything here, it should still be here, unless it got washed awayâ€|

Then it caught his eye. Just the corner of something metallic, only seen because of the contrast between it and the dark mud. Mulder dug it out, coming up with a small piece of something, not more than two inches wide and an inch long. When he held it in his fingers he realized that it was not metal at all, more like plastic. It was thin and had a dull metallic gleam to it, but the material was softer. Almost spongy. He put it in his trenchcoat pocket.

Mulder stayed for a while longer, just to make sure he didn't find anything else. But he had the feeling that he had already found what he was looking for. Finally, when he decided that he couldn't handle the rain any longer, he stood and headed for the sheriff's office.

2:13 PM

Sunday

County Morgue

Scully had been working for about twenty minutes when she heard the door behind her open. She turned to see Mulder enter, and she went back to what she was doing. "How'd you get here?" she asked without looking at him.

"Sheriff gave me a ride. Have you found anything?" He moved up to stand beside her, looking down at the body.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I haven't been able to find a reason for this girl's death."

"What? What about the dehydration?"

She shook her head. "It was being taken care of; it shouldn't have been a problem. I have to get the complete medical records from the

hospital, but blood loss wasn't the reason either. I'm going to check for any kind of chemicals in her body, possibly injected and the cause of these puncture wounds. They could be syringe marks, but they look a little too bigâ€| You're dripping on the floor, Mulder."

"Huh?" He looked down at his feet where a small pool of water was beginning to form. "Oh, sorry. I guess I should clean that up before you slip or somethingâ€|" He sounded distracted.

"Yeah, Mulder, that would be great. Check that closet back there. There should be a mop you can use." She suppressed a sigh. It was like dealing with a four year old sometimes. No, honey, you can't finger paint on the walls. Let mommy get that yellow off your fingers before it gets on â€"

There was a crash behind her. Scully spun around to see Mulder on his knees, one hand on the counter above him, trying to hold himself up. She was at his side in a second, pulling her latex gloves off and tossing them on the floor. She'd worry about cleaning up later. The noise had come from his hand hitting an empty metal pan that had been lying on the counter, ready in case she needed it during the autopsy. His head was bowed; his eyes were closed.

"Mulder, what's wrong?" she asked as she got down on her knees beside him, reaching to check his pulse. Her fingers brushed his skin. "Jesus, Mulder, you're burning up. Come on, let's get you some air." She pulled his arm over her shoulders and slowly helped him outside.

The fresh air seemed to help, and she watched him take a couple of deep breaths. He sat in the hard plastic chair outside the door and rubbed his temples as if he had a headache. "Alright, Mulder, what's wrong?"

"Head hurts."

"Okay, but what happened in there?"

He looked up at her with a weak version of his patented everything's-fine-Scully smile. "I must've tripped."

She looked him over, not buying it for a second. "On what?" she asked sarcastically. "Your shoelace?"

Mulder looked down at his shoes; they were both laced tight. "Nope. Probably something in there. Maybe I should sue?" He watched her face as if waiting to see what she thought of the idea.

She decided that the fact that he was still able to joke around was a good sign, but she knew that there had been nothing on the floor in there for him to trip over. And she knew that he knew it too. "Let's go, Mulder."

"But shouldn't we wait until we get back to DC to file the suit?" he asked innocently.

"I'm taking you back to the motel."

"Scully, I â€""

She shook her head. "It's either the motel or the nearest hospital."

He got to his feet quickly. "Hospital? Scully, I'm fine. I'm just tired, is all. I probably tripped over my own feet." He looked a bit sheepish, but he met her eyes.

\*Mulder's telling me the truth? About his health?\* She looked him over again. It was possible still that this was simply extreme exhaustion, fever and all. Maybe he wasn't even as warm as she had thought. It was fairly cold in that room, after all. Best to have him rest, and take things from there. He did look tiredâ€|

2:53 PM

Sunday

The Red Robin Roadside Motel

Scully was glad that they had checked in before they split up after lunch, so that they didn't have to go through the hassle now. She followed Mulder into his room and watched him toss his coat over a chair before flopping down on the bed. She picked up the coat and hung it on one of the two hangers in the small closet, knowing it would never dry if it was left where it was. That was all she needed â€" a partner who reeked of mildew.

When she came back into the room Mulder was sitting up and taking his shoes off. She left those where they were thrown; she was not going to become his maid. She'd seen his apartment â€" once she started trying to clean up after him, it would become a full time job. At least working for the FBI she got benefits. And somehow she doubted that handling Mulder's laundry would be any safer than battling killer liver-eating mutants.

Mulder saw the smile on her face. "What's so funny? I'll bet they don't even have cable," he pouted.

She rolled her eyes. "Look, Mulder, I told the tech at the morgue that I'd be back soon. Do you need anything before I go?"

"I'm fine, Scully," he repeated. He yawned. "I want to talk to the parents of at least one of the girls today."

"Get some sleep, Mulder. I'll be back as soon as I finish the autopsy."

"Yes, Doctorâ€|"

As she walked back to her car, a little voice in the back of her mind nagged at her. \*Something's wrong. Mulder usually doesn't give in this easily.\* She shook her head. He was doing what she wanted him to do; why was she complaining?

\*You're getting paranoid, Dana. Too much time in the basementâ€| \*

Mulder lay back against the pillows, eyes closed, not even bothering to get under the sheets. He had loosened his tie but he didn't really

feel like making the effort to take it off. Or his suit jacket. His entire body was beginning to ache; faint, but noticeable. \*I can't be getting the flu now. There's too much to do.\* He remembered the piece of unknown material in his pocket. \*Got to take that to be analyzed\* Maybe I should send it to The Lone Gunmen. Or should I send it to the lab boys at Headquarters? But how can I be sure it won't get "lost?" Maybe I'll just hang on to it for now!\* His head hurt so badly that he was having trouble thinking. And this damn rash on his arm\*

Mulder lifted his shirt sleeve to peek at the skin again. The area was covered with tiny red spots, made worse now by his furious scratching. He wondered what he had come in contact with to cause that. Hell, at this point he didn't really care what caused it â€“ he just wanted a tube of cortisone cream to get rid of it. Maybe Scully had some with her\*

Somewhere in the middle of these tumbling thoughts, Mulder drifted off into sleep.

5:41 PM

Sunday

The Red Robin Roadside Motel

"Mulder. Mulder, wake up."

"Huhwha...?" He opened his eyes to see Scully sitting on the edge of his bed. \*That didn't take long\* he thought, but then he noticed that it was dark outside. Well, dark<sub>er</sub>, at any rate. "What time is it?" he asked her as he sat up."

Scully stood. "You slept for almost three hours. How do you feel?"

\*Three hours??\* "Uhâ€| better. I feel a lot better." It was true, he realized as he got out of the bed. The achy feeling was gone, and the headache had subsided to a dull throbbing. His wrist still itched though. "Scully, do you have any cortisone cream?"

She blinked. "For what?"

He pushed back his sleeve to show her the rash. "Mulder, how did this happen?"

Mulder shrugged. "I don't know."

She frowned. He hated when she did that â€“ and it was usually because of him. "I don't, I'm sorry. But keep an eye on that. If it gets any worse, I want to know about it. And quit scratching."

"Sure."

She looked at him as if she didn't believe him. After a minute of him trying to give her his best I'll-be-good-I-promise expression, she finally broke the silence. "I called the Carmichaels. They're expecting us. Did you know that the phone numbers in this town only have four digits?"

He raised an eyebrow at that but left it alone. "Do you have the address?" he asked as he put on his shoes.

"No, Mulder, I thought we'd just drive around calling out their name until we found them. Yes, of course I have the address."

He smiled at her. "Okay, Scully, just checking." He found his trenchcoat in the closet \*How'd that get in there?\* and pulled it on. He followed her to the door. "I'll drive."

6:01 PM

Sunday

The Carmichaels' Residence

The house was off a long dirt road that was off of the main street. They had had to drive through plenty of shallow mud to get there, and he did not want to see the look on the Hertz people's faces when they returned this car. He made a mental note to find a car wash before they turned it in.

The den they were talking in was mostly dark wood, accompanied by a thick forest-green carpet. There were a few paintings on the walls, all of them signed with what looked to him as a graceful, sweeping "M." Morgan? There was talent here, even he could see that with an untrained eye. They were abstracts, all of them, with fluid lines and smeared shapes that seemed to melt together. There was one that he couldn't seem to pull himself away from, the one with the long gray streak in the center. Were those arms coming out of that shape? Legs? If one looked at it a certain way, the form seemed to be standing in the middle of a corridorâ€|

Behind him, Scully was asking the same question she had asked Winters, about whether or not the girl had mentioned noticing anyone following her before her abduction. Scully could find a practical, scientific answer in anything, he knew. But what if there was more here than just a simple kidnappingâ€|

There are secrets thereâ€|The answers will lead you to Samantha.

But how could he find the answers if all the abductees were dead? There had to be something else here, some other way to get the answers he needed.

"Did your daughter paint these?" he asked. Everyone turned to look at him standing under one of the paintings. He was almost as surprised as they were to hear the question. He hadn't intended to speakâ€| But he had learned that sometimes it was profitable to go where your subconscious directed. Sometimes it enabled you to understand things you never would have gotten in your conscious mind.

Ben Carmichael came over to stand beside him. "Those are Morgan's, yes. She wanted to go to an art collegeâ€| His wife, Judy, came up and wrapped her arms around him when he broke off.

"Did she ever tell you what she was painting here?"

The expression on his face turned to almost a scowl. "No. Why?"

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Scully watching him. She was giving him The Look again, just as she had when he had asked the sheriff about UFO sightings. The one she always gave him when he was treading into what she considered to be fantastical territory. The one that she threw at him every time he mentioned aliens or psychic powers or any other kind of unexplained phenomena.

He did what he always did with The Look. He ignored it.

"Mr. Carmichael, Mrs. Carmichael, what do you see in this picture?"

"What?" Morgan's father sounded like he was on the edge of completely losing his patience with these people and their questions. Mulder had seen it countless times before, especially when the questions revolved around the sudden loss of a loved one. Those left behind were angry at the world, and they tended to take that anger out on whomever was close enough. Especially if that person was what seemed to them to be a prying stranger. "I don't see what this has to do with the investigation."

He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to be in this room confronting these people with his idea of what had taken place, an idea that they would most likely never believe anyway. His headache was returning full force, and his back hurt. He didn't want to look in their eyes anymore, didn't want to see the pain that he remembered so clearly—the pain of having someone ripped away from you without warning.

But this might be important. So he pressed on. "Please, sir, do you see a specific image in this painting?"

Carmichael was enraged now. "What is this, a bloody ink-blot test? I thought you people were going to find out who killed my little girl. What the hell does this have to do with any of it?" Mulder saw the tears in his eyes. "You don't have any idea what it's like. No idea. I lost her!" A sob choked off the rest.

//His sister screaming in the darkness. "HELP ME, FOX!!"//

Mulder tried to catch his breath as the world went into a sudden spin. He held on, standing straight with his knees locked, and it passed. But the words still echoed in his mind. I lost her!

— —

"I think you should leave now," Judy Carmichael said calmly, one hand on her husband's shoulder. Mulder felt Scully near him, almost as if she was going to take his arm and lead him to the door. He was still dizzy (You don't have any idea...) but he followed her, forcing himself to put one foot in front of the other. A part of him wanted to turn around, to scream at the top of his lungs, to tell them. \*I do know! they took her they took Samantha I lost her!\* For a moment he thought he was going to pass out.

Scully must have seen it, because she did take his arm then. He tried to anchor himself, to use that small sensation of her hand on his arm to pull himself back. He took a deep breath of the rain-cleansed

outside air as they reached the doorway.

They were at the car when Judy Carmichael came out of the house. Mulder flinched, hit suddenly by an overwhelming urge to protect himself from any more memories by curling up in the front seat and covering his ears. \*Come on, Mulder. You're a goddamn FBI agent. Act like it.\*

But the tall woman only had a request. "Please, when can I have my daughter's body? I want to bury her, to give her a proper funeralâ€| I can't bear the thought of her in that cold morgueâ€|" Her voice cracked, but she did not cry. Mulder was amazed at this woman's strength. Or the depths of her denial.

"We're working as fast as we can, Mrs. Carmichael," Scully said, her voice smooth and soothing. "I hope to be done by tomorrow at the latest. Soon, I promise."

The other woman nodded and turned to go back into the house. Mulder handed Scully the car keys without protest, getting in on the passenger's side. He had to adjust the seat so that his long legs could fit under the dashboard, then he lay back against the headrest and closed his eyes.

\_I lost herâ€|\_

— —

"Mulder, are you alright?"

He let out a long slow breath that he didn't realize he'd been holding, and opened his eyes. "Yeah, Scully. Just a headache."

She frowned at him. "You want to tell me what that was all about? With the painting?"

"Did you see it?"

"No. I was busy asking questionsâ€| You know, the thing we're supposed to do when we go interview someone?" The question was sarcastic, but only slightly so. She was upset about what he had done in there, he could tell, but she was also concerned. Maybe he looked worse than he thought. She softened with a quiet sigh. "What was in the painting, Mulder?"

He was saved from answering when his cell phone rang. "Tell you later," he promised. He turned on the phone. "Mulder."

"Agent Mulder, this is Jim Winters. I have someone here that I think you'd be interested in talking toâ€|"

7:12PM

Sunday

Dee's Diner

\*Here we are, at the local greasy spoon once again.\* Of course, it wasn't like they had much choice. This town didn't seem to be known for its variety in eating establishments. Actually, it was Scully he

felt bad for; she hated this kind of place. Though he wasn't finding it very appetizing at the moment either. The smell wafting up from the untouched burger and fries on his plate was making him nauseous.

He tried to ignore it and focus on what was being said. The person Winters had called them to meet was seventeen year old Darlene Alamond, a former classmate and friend of Morgan Carmichael. She claimed not to have spent much time with Antha Wood, at least not before Morgan "took an interest in her." Mulder asked her what she meant by that.

The brunette pushed a strand of hair behind her ear and took a sip of her Coke. "Antha was kinda shy at school, and Morgan singled her out. I don't know why. But soon Morgan had her with us all the time. It was like she was planning to use her for something. Morgan always got these crazy ideas, you know? And sometimes she'd need people to help her do them."

Mulder glanced over at Scully. She returned his look, the same confusion he felt mirrored in her eyes, but she said nothing. "Crazy ideas? Like what?"

Darlene shrugged. "Stuff. Nothing bad, you know, but crazy things. Like the time she wanted me to help her look for fairies. That's what she said, I swear. She wanted to find fairies."

He couldn't help it. "Did you?"

"Huh?"

Scully took control of the conversation. "Darlene, did Morgan ever try to get you to do anything illegal with her?"

The girl took a big bite out of her hamburger, thinking or trying to stall while she chewed â€“ it was difficult to tell which. Mulder's stomach flipped over, and he swallowed hard.

"No," was the eventual answer. He watched her, trying to determine if that was the truth, or if she just decided she didn't want to possibly get herself in trouble. Damn, his head hurt.

Scully tried again. "What did Morgan want to have Antha do with her?"

Darlene shook her head and the tucked-away lock of hair came loose. She pushed it back again. "I don't know. She never really told meâ€¦"

Mulder wanted to get this over with. He wanted to go back to the motel and take a long hot shower and then fall into bed and sleep for a year. Maybe drink a bottle of Pepto Bismal first. But he didn't want to sit here with the smell of food assaulting his nose from all directions and the neon lights sending a constant buzz of pain through his head. So he decided to get right down to it.

"Darlene, did Morgan ever talk to you about aliens?"

Scully was giving him The Look again. But it didn't matter, because for a brief moment he saw recognition in the girl's eyes. Recognition

and shock. And he knew he'd hit something.

Then the glimpse was gone, and her eyes clouded over with denial. "Aliens? I know I said she had crazy ideas, Mr. Mulder, but not that\_ crazy!"

Scully was looking almost triumphant next to him. She was asking something else, something mundane and far off track. But he wanted to press, to ask her again, sure that if he just kept trying he could get her to admit it. Maybe if Scully wasn't there. Maybe he could get Scully to go pay the bill, and then she'd tell him. She'd tell him why Morgan Carmichael painted aliens long before she died from a mysterious abduction. She might even tell him how many times her friend had been taken, if she knew. Secrets!

His head was spinning, and he suddenly realized that he was going to throw up. He stood up way too quickly, mumbling something to excuse himself, and took off to the bathroom where he barely made it before emptying his stomach of everything he'd eaten recently.

\*Aliens? Gee, Mulder, didn't see that one coming.\* By now she had a pretty good idea of his basic theory, even if he had yet to fill her in on the specifics. Alien abduction. Though how he'd gotten that out of the case file she'd read, she had no clue. Maybe that was the part that he was hiding -- perhaps the mysterious "informant" had told him that that's what this case was really about. And, being Mulder, he was just waiting for the right moment to spring it on her.

At least the girl had the sense to deny it. She could just imagine if this girl, wanting attention in the midst of all this chaos, had claimed that not only had her friends been abducted by little green \*oh sorry, Mulder, gray\* men, but that she had as well, sending them off on a tangent that would last who-knows-how-long. And Mulder would end up getting sucked in the way he always did!

She was still concerned about the look she had seen cross his face when Ben Carmichael had begun shouting. She was sure it seemed to him that no one understood, but that didn't stop her from wanting to grab him and say, "My partner knows exactly how you feel. He lost his sister when he was young, and he hasn't stopped mourning since. Look what this is doing to him!" Of course she hadn't -- instead she had done the best she could, which was try and offer Mulder some silent emotional support. It had felt like a distant second, but she really didn't know what else to do.

And now he was bringing up the alien thing again. It was almost like he was trying to find it somewhere in all this -- and he wasn't going to stop until he did. But she wasn't going to let him run himself ragged on this one. As soon as the toxicology reports came back on Morgan Carmichael, she was going to release the body to the parents. After that, there really wasn't much else to do, except give the hospital records a quick once-over, find out about the background checks on the names they got from the motel registers, and probably talk briefly with the parents of Antha Wood. She hoped she'd be able to convince him of the futility of their continued presence once all the little things had been done. Besides, she was starting to come up with a theory of her own, thanks to the girl sitting in front of her.

"Darlene," she began, trying to divert the conversation again from

one of Mulder's little leaps of logic, "tell me more about the things that Morgan wanted you to do. Anything else come to mind beside the fairy hunt?"

Before the girl had a chance to answer, Mulder stood up abruptly and muttered something about using the "little agent's room." Scully stared after him. \*I follow along with you through all your questions, Mulder. Just because you don't like where I'm going with this doesn't mean you have to leave me here while you go sulk!\*

She turned back to the girl with a sigh. Darlene was still looking at the closed door to the men's room. "Darlene?" she said, trying to get the girl's attention back to the conversation.

The teenager smiled. "He's cute."

"Mmm," was Scully's noncommittal response.

Darlene looked at her. "Are you two, likeâ€| you know, together?" There was an almost hopeful note in her voice.

Scully resisted the urge to wipe that smirk off her face. She wasn't going to sit here and try to explain the complexities of her and Mulder's relationship. She hadn't yet sorted it all out herself, really. Besides, the girl was seventeen, for heaven's sake. Did she think that if Scully said no, that she'd have a chance with Mulder? For some reason that idea annoyed her. "He's my partner," she said with just a touch of frost in her tone.

Darlene dropped it at that, but Scully still noticed her shoot the occasional glance past her to the bathroom, waiting for Mulder to reappear. She just shook her head.

"Darlene," she began again, trying to grab on to some thread that would help her unravel all this, "do you remember anything about the last time you talked to Morgan or Antha? Did any of them say anything that now strikes you as important, even if it might not have at the time?"

The girl just shrugged and took a bite out of her burger. Scully could feel her frustration growing, but she strove to keep it out of her expression. Where the hell was Mulder?

"Did Morgan get along with her parents?"

That question seemed to take her by surprise. She frowned. "Sometimesâ€| but they fought a lot. Morgan wanted to go to art school in New York, but her parents said that she had to go to Salt Lake Cityâ€| She was real upset about that. She told me once that she knew they didn't really love her. That she could prove it, if she wanted to."

She had Scully's attention now. "Prove it how?"

Darlene shrugged again. "She didn't say."

"Did she ever talk about running away?"

There was hesitation then, but after a moment Darlene answered. "She

told me that she was going to go to New York no matter what. But that wasn't for a year, not until after high schoolâ€|"

Scully could see the girl's lower lip beginning to tremble. She had been so stalwart during the entire interview, acting almost ambivalent about the recent death of her friend, but that façade seemed about to crumble. Scully felt her annoyance melting away. This was just a girl â€" a child, essentially â€" trying to act tough. Her mind went back to the death of her father, and how she had insisted on working instead of taking time to grieveâ€|

Just a couple of more questions. Then, if the girl wanted, she'd drive her home. "Darlene, did Antha get along well with her parents?"

"I don't know." The expression in the girl's eyes was hard now as she stood up. Scully sensed that she was trying to escape before she broke down completely. "Look, I have school tomorrow. Got homework to do, you know? Can I go?"

\*So that's all we're going to get from herâ€|\* Scully sighed. "Sure, you can go. Do you want a ride somewhere?"

"No, I can walk. Tell your partner I said goodbyeâ€|" And she was out the door without another word.

Scully stared at what was left on her plate and considered what the girl had said. The conversation was falling into place with her own theory, and Mulder wasn't going to like it. It had absolutely no trace of space aliens.

She turned in the booth and glanced back at the bathroom door. What was he doing in there? It seemed like he had been gone a hell of a long timeâ€| She didn't exactly relish the idea of going in there after him, but she was beginning to get just a little worried. \*Don't be ridiculous, Dana. He's fine. Sometimes you can be so paranoidâ€|\* She'd pay the check. And if he wasn't back thenâ€| Well, then she'd probably have to go find him.

Thankfully, Mulder returned just as she got back to the table. She handed him his coat, already shouldering into hers. He put it on, glancing at the empty booth in confusion as they headed for the door. "What happened to Darlene?"

"School night. She said she had some homework to do."

"Well we certainly wouldn't want to contribute to the delinquency of a minorâ€|"

"I suppose notâ€| Mulder, what's wrong?"

He was holding on to the door frame with one hand, looking for all the world like that was the only thing keeping him up. He shook his head and took a deep breath, then straightened and walked outside. She followed, almost running into him when he stopped in front of her on the sidewalk.

"Mulderâ€|"

He looked down at her. "Just a little dizzy for a second there. I'm

okay now." She frowned. "Come on, Scully, tell me what I missedâ€| Any good girl gossip?" Mulder, always changing the subject when it came to his health.

"She thinks you're cute."

He blinked. "What?"

It always amazed her that he seemed to be completely oblivious to his effect on the opposite sex. "That's what she said. Then she wanted to know what our relationship was."

There was a mischievous glint in his eyes that she was able to pick up even in the rain and the dim lights of the diner behind them. "What'd you tell her?"

Scully shook her head in exasperation. "Let's go, Mulder. I don't really want to stand in the rain all night." \*And I want to get you into better light so I can get a good look at you\* she added silently.

He gave her an exaggerated sigh. "I never get to hear the good partsâ€|"

On the walk back to the motel she filled him in on the conversation that he had missed. Being Mulder, he listened to it all thoughtfully, then asked a question that had nothing to do with anything she had just said. "Did she say anything to you about Morgan having been in contact with alien life forms?"

Scully rolled her eyes. "No, Mulder, she didn't." She followed him into his room.

He didn't press the subject, which surprised her. She noticed that he appeared to be a little pale, and his exhaustion was betrayed in every movement. \*He shouldn't still be tired\* she thought. \*He's gotten more sleep today than he probably has in the last week. Maybe he's coming down with something.\*

"Are you spending the night in here with me, Scully?" he asked innocently. "'Cause I certainly don't mind, but I have to know which side of the bed you wantâ€|"

She would've thrown a pillow at him for that one, but he was already lying on them. "No, Mulder, I'm not staying. It may be eight o'clock here, but my body thinks it's ten. I'm tired, and I'm going to bed. In my room."

"Oh. Okay, Scully." He was giving her that disappointed puppy-dog look, and she couldn't help but laugh. That earned her a weak smile from him.

"Do you feel alright?" she asked seriously.

"Yeah. I'm just tiredâ€| and I've got a headache still. Go to bed," he said lightly as he closed his eyes.

She stood there for a minute, watching him. Finally she decided that if he wasn't better in the morning, she would insist that he let her check him out. And if he didn't cooperate, she'd threaten him with

the hospital again. That worked every time.

Smothering a yawn, Scully turned and left the room.

10:43 PM

Sunday

The Red Robin Roadside Motel

Something woke Scully. Her eyes snapped open and she lay there, suddenly fully awake, trying to determine what it was. There was no one in her room, she was sure of it, and she could see that the door was completely closed. Outside her closed window, the crickets' song was audible beneath the steady patter of rain. Everything seemed as it should be.

So what had woken her up?

\*Hyperactive imagination, perhaps? Go back to sleep!\*

Then she heard a dull thud, like something had fallen against the far wall. Like it was coming from her darkened bathroom, or, more likely!

Mulder's room.

Scully jumped out of bed and slipped her feet into her shoes almost as a reflex. She grabbed her gun, and the key to Mulder's room that was sitting on her nightstand. She had somewhat guiltily slipped it into her pocket earlier, though she hadn't really thought about why. Maybe she would check on him in the middle of the night, she had told herself. Whatever, she was glad she had it with her now. She didn't want to have to go find the manager and try to explain why she needed the key to her partner's room!

She left her room and moved to his door, thankful that the awning above kept her from getting soaked. She was feeling rather silly anyway! She would probably come bursting in, gun ready, only to find Mulder asleep in bed, like she should be. Or worse, she'd find him awake and watching TV and then she'd have to hear about her theft of the key \_and\_ her paranoia until the end of time. Mulder never forgot things.

\*You probably imagined the noise\* she chided herself as she unlocked his door. Still, she might as well check. She'd come this far!

Scully pushed the door open cautiously. She could see from the light coming in the open doorway that Mulder wasn't in bed, and her heart started to beat just a little faster. Bringing her gun up to chest level, Scully swung around, pushing the door closed with a foot. No Mulder. But the bathroom door was shut, and she could see yellow light seeping out from under the crack at the bottom. The shower was running.

"Mulder?" she called softly as she flipped the lights on. No answer.

\*Of course there's no answer. He can't hear you over the water in the

shower.\*

She hesitated, unsure as to her next move. Should she just turn around and go back to her room? The thought of her warm bed was extremely appealing. It was freezing in Mulder's room. Besides, she was going to look really foolish when he came out of the shower and found her standing in the middle of his room, armed and dangerous.

But what had that noise been? Foolishness be damned. She had to find out if he was okay. "Mulder?" she tried again, a little louder, hoping he could hear her but not wanting to wake the neighbors. Motel walls were incredibly thin!â€

She was answered with a low moan. \*Oh God.\* Scully crossed the small room and tried the handle on the bathroom door. It turned under her hand, and she slowly pushed the door open.

Mulder was crumpled on the floor of the shower stall, the water beating down on him from above and running down his face and sides. The shower door was open, as if he had been trying to get out, and water was splashing out onto the floor.

Scully set her gun on the sink counter and reached in to turn off the water. Mulder was shaking, and she immediately got both of the thin towels off the rack behind the door. He stirred, and moaned again. She didn't see any blood, but there was the hint of a bruise forming on his forehead, which must have been the cause of the noise that brought her here.

"Mulder? Mulder, it's Scully. Can you hear me?"

His eyelids fluttered for a moment before opening. He winced at the bright light, then squinted at her. "Scully," he said, his voice raspy, "what are you doing in my shower?"

She smiled. \*Okay, no brain trauma.\* She helped him to sit up. "Do you remember what happened? You hit your head!â€

He reached up and tentatively touched the bruising spot. "I don't rememberâ€|I was going to take a shower, to see if I would feel any betterâ€|" He was still trembling, despite the fact that she had done her best to dry him off.

"Can you stand up? I want to get you into bed." She offered him her hand.

He used her and the edge of the shower door to slowly pull himself to his feet. "You don't know how long I've waited to hear you say that, Scully," he said with a feeble grin.

\*What had sheâ€|? Oh jeez.\* She gave him her best knock-it-off-Mulder look, but she was glad that he still felt up to cracking jokes. At least, she hoped that was a jokeâ€| "Here, put these on." She tossed him a pair of boxers that had been lying on the floor, out of reach of the spreading puddle.

She grabbed him when he swayed, determined not to let him pull her down with him. But she was pretty much wedged between the toilet and the wall in the tiny bathroom, and she kept them both on their feet.

Not wanting to try it again, however, she decided that this would be a good time to help Mulder to bed.

"Come on, Mulder, one foot in front of the other," she said under her breath. "I'm not carrying you back to bed."

They made it across the room without incident, and she helped him lie back against the pillows. He was ghostly pale, and shaking. She moved to pull the covers up over him.

"Damnâ€!" she said softly when she saw the same rash-like spots on his chest. "What is this?"

He opened his eyes and saw what she was looking at. "Yeah," he said, almost apologetically, "I guess it spread."

Scully looked at the red area, frowning. It reminded her of somethingâ€! "You know, if I didn't know any better, I might say this looks like the macula stage of the chicken poxâ€!"

Mulder's eyes had drifted closed again. "I wouldn't know," he mumbled. "Never had 'em."

"What\_?" Her near-yell brought him awake again. "You never had the chicken pox, Mulder?" her tone was urgent. She pulled his arm out from under the comforter and looked at his wrist. What had been a spotty rash had now transformed into red raised pimples. She dropped his arm and sat on the edge of the bed, closing her eyes. \*I'm too tired for thisâ€!\*

"What is it, Scully?" His voice brought her attention back. He sounded like nothing so much as a child who's afraid that he had done something wrong. And that he was going to be punished for it.

She opened her eyes and looked down at him. There was concern in his eyes, and, after a moment, she realized it was for her. She shook her head slightly. "I'm going to go back to my room and get my medical bag. Don't go anywhere."

"Yes, ma'am," he quipped. "I'll behave."

"That'll be the day, Mulder."

Fox Mulder had the chicken pox. Scully had found bumps and spots in various stages of the disease all over his body, and she knew it was only going to get worse. His temperature was 101 right now, and she wasn't expecting that to get any lower any time soon. In fact, she knew it was going to keep climbing.

She looked up from the thermometer and sighed. It was always something with himâ€! "Okay, Mulder, here's what we're going to do. I'm going to check us out of here and then pack up our stuff. Then we're going to drive to the closest hospital and get you checked in. I don't even want to take you on a plane like this. You're highly contagious, though most people (she put a slight emphasis on the "most") have already gotten this at this point in their livesâ€!"

He struggled to sit up; Scully gently pushed him back down. "Scully, I'm fine. Well, okay, maybe not that fine, but I don't need to be taken to the hospital. We have a case here. We have to find out what

happened to those girls."

"Mulder, this is an extremely dangerous disease when occurring in adults. You need to be in the hospital where you can be taken care of if there are any complications. Besides, I think we know what happened to those girls. And it had nothing to do with little gray people abducting earthers."

"Scully, all the evidence points to â€" "

"All the evidence points to a simple kidnapping. It's highly likely that Morgan decided to run away from home, probably convincing Antha to do the same, and they both got nabbed by a psychotic stranger passing through town." He was shaking his head, rolling it back and forth against the pillow. "Look, Mulder, we can debate this later. Right now I'm going to get us ready to leave."

His let his eyes close, and she rose from the bed. Still in her dark green sweatsuit that she had been sleeping in and the inch-high pumps that she had worn out of her room, Scully made a dash across the parking lot to the manager's office.

The night manager looked up from the small TV on his desk when she entered. He looked her over skeptically. "Can I help you?"

She nodded, trying to appear professional even in her ridiculous outfit. "I'd like to check out. Dana Scully, Room 12. Also my partner, Fox Mulder, in Room 13."

He scratched the back of his head and looked at her. For a moment she thought she was going to have to repeat the request, but then he just shrugged. "I can surely check you out, Miss Scully, but I don't know where exactly it is you're gonna go."

"Excuse me?"

"The road's flooded in both directions about a mile out where it crosses the river. You're not going to get very far."

\*Dammit. All this rainâ€| I should have expected this. Fantastic timing as always, Mulder.\* She took a deep breath. "And I suppose the hospital is on the other side of that, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am, it isâ€| Why? Are you sick or something?"

She had a sudden urge to tell this man she had some deadly communicable disease, just to watch him flee the office. \*Down, Dana. It's not his fault it's rainingâ€|\* "My partner. He's got the chicken pox. He needs to be in the hospitalâ€|"

"Chicken pox, huh? My daughter got that when she was four."

\*Yeah, like every other normal person.\* "Do you have any idea when it's supposed to stop raining?" she asked.

"Weather report says another day or so." He looked sympathetic. "Anything I can do?"

She shook her head. "Not at the moment, thanks."

Scully turned and went back into the rain, trying to think this all through calmly. Mulder didn't have to be in the hospital now. It was just a precaution. So everything was under control at the moment. She would just watch him closely, and hope that the rain stopped before things got any worse.

His eyes were closed when she entered the room. \*Have to tell him the news later. No doubt he'll take this as a sign that we need to continue our investigation here!\* She looked around the almost-empty room, but the only thing that caught her eye was a small hard-looking chair in the corner. \*No way am I going to sleep on that.\* She glanced over at Mulder, then quickly went back to her room and grabbed a pillow and the bed's comforter.

When she passed Mulder's bathroom again, she remembered the mess on the floor. Dropping her bedding next to his bed, she went in and used the two damp towels to soak up the water best she could. She saw her gun sitting on the counter, and, leaving the wet towels in the sink, she took it with her into the other room. One last look at Mulder to confirm that he was asleep, and then she wrapped herself in the comforter, soon falling into her own dreams.

Sometime before dawn

Monday

The Red Robin Roadside Motel

She opened her eyes slowly, trying to figure out where in the hell she was. Her back hurt, and she felt like she was sleeping on a board. \*Way to go, Mulder. Always pick the place with the least comfortable beds!\* Then she remembered. She wasn't in bed. She was sleeping on the thin carpet of Mulder's room. And Mulder was!

Out of bed?

Scully's fingers instinctively closed around the gun beside her as she watched the figure slowly making its way across the room. "Mulder?" she hissed. The shadowy figure turned its head in her direction, then grabbed hold of the low desk to steady itself. \*Must be Mulder.\* Scully let go of the gun and got to her feet.

"You're not supposed to be out of bed," she scolded gently as she took his arm to let him lean on her. Even through her clothing she could feel the heat coming off his body.

"...have to go to the bathroom," he mumbled.

"Okay, come on." She helped him to the bathroom door, but there he shook her off and moved inside on his own, closing the door on her. The message was clear enough. Scully leaned against the wall and waited, trying to blink the sleep out of her eyes.

When he failed to reappear after a couple of minutes, she began to get worried. He had turned the water on in the sink, but that was the only thing she could hear. "Mulder? Are you alright?" No answer. "Mulder, answer me. Or I'm going to come in there!" Still nothing. \*Dammit, Mulder!\*

She pushed the door open. He was sitting with his back against the

wall, the side of his face pressed against the cabinet under the sink. He had his eyes tightly closed, and there were beads of perspiration along his hairline.

She turned off the water and knelt beside him. "Mulderâ€| Look at me."

He opened his eyes, and, for a moment, she saw not the man she knew but the boy he must have been. Sick and scared, and silently begging for her to make it all better. She reached out and brushed a piece of hair from his eyes. "What happened?"

He blinked, and the boy was gone. Replaced by Mulder, the man who lived his life in endless pursuit of the truth, but who would never fail to try and cover up the way he truly felt, emotionally or physically. He managed a weak shrug. "Dizzyâ€|thought I should sit before I fell over."

Scully smiled slightly at the simple logic. "Good thinking. Do you feel able to get up and go back to bed?"

His eyes darted toward the open door behind her. "You mean I can't just stay in here?"

"No, Mulder, I'm not going to let you spend the night on the bathroom floor. Let me help youâ€|"

She got him up and into the other room, helping him lie back on the bed. "Do you need anything, Mulder? A glass of water, maybe?"

He shook his head. "What time is it?"

"I have no idea. My watch is back in my room. It doesn't matter, anywayâ€| Just try and sleep. I'll be right here."

His eyes closed. "Go back to your room, Scully. I'll be okay."

She smiled at his attempt at chivalry. "I'm staying here, Mulder."

He didn't respond. She pulled the covers up to his chin and stood there watching him for a few silent minutes. Then she went back to her own makeshift bed and tried to follow her own advice.

// They are running, running through the yard behind the house on the Vineyard. He has her little hand clasped tightly in his, practically dragging her along behind him. If only she had longer legs, she could keep up with himâ€| But he's not going to let go. He isn't going to let them get her.

His breath is coming fast, and he can hear his heart pounding in his ears. Got to hurry up, run faster, faster, got to get awayâ€| The leaves crunch under the soles of his boots, the new brown boots he just got for Christmas. Not even broken in yet, these shoes. He doesn't remember putting them on. He can't remember anything before the escaping. He doesn't even remember why they are escaping, just the intense fear and the knowledge that if they don't get away, don't find some place safe to hide, bad things are going to happen. Bad, bad thingsâ€|

He trips and flies forward, his hand instinctively releasing its hold on her so that his arms can try and break his fall. He falls face down in a pile of leaves \*Fall leaves on the ground after Christmas?\* dirt filling up his mouth. Pain, pain in his head and his back, and he is itching all overâ€|

"FOX!" she screams.

He forces himself over on to his back. She is struggling in the arms of the creature, his innocent little sister in the arms of that \_thing\_. He tries to get up, but he can't move. The roots of the trees have grown over him, ensnaring him. "FOX, HELP ME!" she screams again.

\*No, this isn't right, this isn't the way it happenedâ€|\*

Then the creature moves into view. It isn't alien at all, butâ€|his father? His screams match his sister's. "LET HER GO!" Why is this happening? What had they done? Why is Samantha being taken instead of him? He would have given himself in her placeâ€|

The two figures are backing up slowly. He fights against the roots, trying to free himself to save her. "Samantha, I'm coming, hold onâ€|" he says almost to himself as he struggled. The roots are thick, especially around his wrists and ankles. But he has to break loose, to get to herâ€|

He looks up again, tears streaming down his face. But it isn't his father holding Samantha. He was wrongâ€| The man has one arm around her throat. In the other hand, a glowing cigarette dangles from his fingers. The Cancermanâ€| \*This isn't rightâ€|\* His sister has ceased to struggle. Her body is limp, her long brown hair concealing her face. The tears come harder. Has that bastard killed her?

The man takes a drag off of the cigarette and smiles at him. He feels the nausea rise in his throat. Then his sister stirs. Her head lifts andâ€|

\*Oh god no this isn't right this isn't happening oh god pleaseâ€|\*

The long brown hair is gone. Short and red now, framing a face he knows so wellâ€| Scully. He has Scully. "Fox, help me," she whispers. His stomach does a back-flip.

The man and Scully move farther away, just backing up and getting smaller and smallerâ€| He twists frantically, trying to get free. The roots cut into his skin, and the itchy sensation is now like white fireâ€| "COME BACK HERE, YOU SON OF A BITCH!" he howlsâ€|  
//

"Mulderâ€| Mulder!"

A soft hand on his forehead, another on his chest. Two small spots of coolness breaking through the overwhelming heat. Scully's voice? Scully was here? Had he let her go? But he was still caught in something, and he had to escapeâ€|

"Mulder, it's only a dream. You're having a dream. You have to calm downâ€|"

A dream?

He forced his eyes open. Scully was leaning over him, her hair falling against the side of her face, a concerned look in her eyes. He blinked hard, trying to slow his breathing. His eyes flitted around the dark room, then back to her face. "Scully?" he tried. It came out sounding like a croak, but she understood.

She smiled down at him, and in that moment he thought that that might be the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Like the smile of an angelâ€| if he believed in angels. "It's okay, it was just a dream."

He nodded, but immediately realized it was a mistake when everything went into a tailspin. He moaned softly. "Gonna be sickâ€|"

He tried to get up, to make it to the bathroom, but he didn't have the strengthâ€| And then Scully was there, holding the trashcan for him while he retched, until there was nothing but the dry heaves that felt like they were ripping him apart from the inside. He fell back onto the pillows, exhausted, trembling all over. Scully got him a glass of water to rinse his mouth out with, and she put what felt like a wet wash cloth on his forehead. He hated feeling this helpless, this dependant. But, at the moment, he didn't really have the energy to do much else but lie there.

"Mulder, you're all tangled up hereâ€|"

He opened his eyes and looked down to see that he had indeed gotten himself all twisted in the sheets. Somehow Scully managed to get him untangled, and she retrieved the comforter from where it had fallen on the floor. He was so hot, he didn't want thatâ€| but the idea of moving his tongue to form the words to tell her seemed like far too much effort.

He wondered why they were still here. Scully had said that she was going to take him to the hospitalâ€| But it must not be an option, or else he knew Scully would have had him there already. All this rainâ€| maybe the river had flowed over and the roads were impassible. He didn't need a hospital anyway, just sleep. He was so tiredâ€|

//"FOX, HELP ME!"//

His eyes flew open. Too soon, the dream was too close, he couldn't sleep now or it would come back. Had to stay awakeâ€| Where was Scully? Scully was gone, he took her, the bastard; she was gone, and he didn't know how to get her backâ€|

"Scullyâ€|" It came out almost as a sob.

"I'm here, Mulder. What is it?" She appeared at his bedside, her hand taking hold of his.

Yes, there she was, there she really was, she hadn't left, hadn't been takenâ€| But she was worried. He could see that in her eyes. He didn't want to make her worry, didn't want to be the cause of her agitation. "â€| 'm sorryâ€|" he whispered.

"Sorry for what?"

Her voice was so caring, and he felt so bad for making her look so upsetâ€| \*Sorry for what? Oh, Scully, I'm so sorry, so very sorry, sorry that I did this, sorry that you're worried, sorry that they took you and I couldn't do anything to stop themâ€|\* He turned his head away from her, the tears stinging the inside of his eyelids. He kept his eyes tightly closed, determined not to let them fallâ€|

"Mulderâ€|" He didn't look at her. "Mulder, whatever it is, I'm sure it's okayâ€| I'm sure that you have nothing to be sorry about."

Her voice was almost pleading. He was making it worse, not looking at her. \*Scully, it's all my faultâ€| They wouldn't have taken you if it wasn't for me. I lost you, just like I lost Sam...\*

"Please tell me what's wrong. Why are you sorry?"

\*Get them to talk it out, sometimes people can resolve their problems just by talking about them to someone else, it doesn't seem so overwhelming when they are able to say it out loudâ€| Way to go, Scully, all the right psychological movesâ€|\* But he wouldn't â€" couldn't â€" talk about it now. Not right now when he couldn't think straight and his whole body itched and his head was poundingâ€| Later, after he'd had more time to decide what he really wanted to say to her. Then he'd apologize like he wanted to, tell her how sorry he was for bringing all this into her lifeâ€|

He turned back to her, and the look of pain in her eyes made him want to hide under the covers. She was so worried, he knew, and he had to reassure her somehow. "I'm sorry you have to sleep on the floor. Notâ€|not exactly my plan for the first time we shared a roomâ€|" It was a feeble attempt and he knew it, but it got a small smile from her and a half-hearted roll of the eyes. He could see that she was still wondering what he had really meant, but he thought he had put the conversation off for a while. Good enough.

His eyes tried to close again, and he forced them back open. But not fast enough that it had escaped the attention of Dr. Scully. "Well, neither of us is getting any sleep out of the deal," she chided in a tone that meant that she wanted him to stop talking and rest.

"That was part of the planâ€|"

"Not my plan. Go back to sleep, Mulder."

He felt a sudden streak of purely irrational fear shoot through him. \*Don't want to sleep, don't want to have those dreamsâ€|\* He'd had plenty of nightmares â€" at least one pretty much every single night â€" but they usually weren't that vivid. He usually couldn't remember them so clearly when he opened his eyes. And they rarely had his partner in them. The mixture of those two elements â€" Samantha's and Scully's abductionsâ€| He shuddered.

Which also didn't escape Scully's notice. From out of nowhere she produced a thermometer and stuck it in his mouth without warning. He always hated having to hold those damn things under his tongue, and he tried to breathe through his nose and concentrate on something else. It was still raining outside, he could hear that now. And

Scully was still holding his hand.

When she looked at the reading on the thermometer, he could tell that it wasn't what she had hoped. "That bad, huh?"

She looked at him for a moment, then put the thermometer down somewhere he couldn't see. "It's gone up," she said noncommittally. "But I was expecting it would." She let go off his hand, and he could hear her rummaging around in her bag. She presented him with two small reddish-brown pills.

"What is it?" he asked. He hated taking medications. God knows he was prescribed enough of them. But they usually ended up in his bathroom trash.

"Ibuprofen, Mulder. It'll bring down the fever." She helped him sit up, and he took the pills. "Okay, now I really want you to try and go back to sleep."

The flash of fear again. \*Come on, Mulder. It's just a nightmare. Stop being such a baby.\* Still, he had to do something or the dream would return the minute he let himself drift off. "Um, Scully?" He felt silly. "Could you maybe talk to me for a while?" She frowned slightly, and the rest of it came out in a rush. "Or if you're too tired, could you turn on the TV? It doesn't have to be loud!" \*You sound like you're about six years old asking to sleep in your parents bed 'cause you're afraid of the dark\*

She sighed softly, just a little whispered breath that he probably wasn't meant to hear, and ran a hand through her hair. She looked tired (\*Yeah, because everyone else needs more than the four hours of sleep that you usually get\*) and he regretted that he had said anything. But she went and got a chair from across the room, moving it to the side of his bed and sitting there. "What do you want to talk about?"

\*I don't know I just want to hear your voice instead of the screams of my sister\* "Life? The universe? Everything?"

She didn't seem to catch the joke, that that was the title of a book by one of his favorite authors. "I don't know, Mulder. That seems like an awfully broad topic for this late at night!" She was smiling. At least there was that.

He shrugged. "Then I don't care. Tell me a story about when you were growing up." He absently itched his shoulder.

Scully grabbed his hand and pulled it down to his side, not letting go. "Don't scratch. You'll just increase the chances of getting an infection." He tried to look properly repentant. "A story about my childhood? Hmm! Did I ever tell you the one about the time I broke Mary Ellen's nose?" He choked, and she laughed. "Guess not. Well, when I was in seventh grade, the girl who sat next to me in Geometry was named Mary Ellen!"

She launched into the story, and he fought to stay awake, generally curious about this one. The vision of the young Dana Scully, provoked by a gossiping classmate and mad as hell, confronting the other girl in the middle of a gym-class basketball game, piqued his interest. But he was exhausted, and, somewhere before the promised right hook,

he slipped away into sleep.

Scully woke to a total numbness in her left arm. She lifted her head to find that she had used said arm as a pillow, and that "despite what she had vowed to herself " she had actually slept in that damned chair. As gently as possible, she detached her hand from Mulder's and stood up. Soft, murky daylight was coming through the crack in the curtains, but she didn't think it was later than seven or so. Putting her hands on her lower back she tried to stretch the complaining muscles there and in her legs.

Mulder was still sleeping. He was curled up almost in a fetal position, looking like nothing more than a small boy. His lips were moving, and occasionally she caught a whispered word or two, but nothing like the nightmare that had awoken her during the night. She left him for a few minutes and went into the bathroom.

After having splashed a few handfuls of water on her face she felt better, but she could still use a shower. And some coffee. Maybe even a danish. The towels in Mulder's room were still wet, so she used the edge of her sweatshirt to dry her skin, hanging the towels on the rack behind the door before returning to the side of her sleeping partner.

He was incredibly pale, with the exception of the red fever splotches on his cheeks. She was worried about dehydration, among other things. She'd have to get him to drink something when he woke up. And hope that he could keep it down. The red bumps were popping up all over now. She knew it would only get worse, and he'd probably be this out of it for two weeks longer. Which meant that she'd have to decide whether or not to fly back to DC without him, to mind the store while he was in the local hospital.

\*Decide that laterâ€|Right now you can't even get out of this town.\*

Mulder stirred, but didn't open his eyes. His muttering seemed to be getting more agitated now, and she wondered if she should wake him up. She'd rarely been around for Mulder's nightmares before, even with all the time she'd spent at his bedside in various hospitals across the country. They usually had him so sedated that he didn't even dream. But last night had scared her almost as much as it had frightened him. His breathing and heart rate had been so fast that she'd almost been afraid he was going to go into some kind of seizure, and he wouldn't stop struggling against the sheets he'd gotten himself tangled up inâ€|

"Danaâ€|so sorryâ€|"

Her head snapped up as the barely audible words caught her attention. He was still asleep. What was this? The same thread that he had been trailing last night? He had said the same thing, though without the unusual use of her first name, but he had refused to tell her what he meant by it. Sorry for what?

"â€|lost youâ€|"

A brick dropped into the bottom of her stomach as she realized what he might be referring to. Was he apologizing for her abduction? Did he somehow feel responsible for what had happened? Was he dreaming

about it? Is that why he had fought sleep last night?

The sudden ring of Mulder's phone made her jump. It was muffled, and it took her a moment to figure out that it was coming from his coat pocket. She retrieved the phone and moved into the bathroom, speaking as quietly as possible so as not to wake Mulder.

"Scully."

"Agent Scully?" It was Sheriff Winters. "Isn't this Agent Mulder's number? I thought I tried your phone first, but there was no answerâ€| Maybe I got the numbers mixed upâ€|"

"No, this is Agent Mulder's phone."

"Ohâ€|" He sounded confused, then suddenly a little flustered. "Oh, I'm sorry, I hope I didn't call at a bad timeâ€|"

What?! Did he think he broke in on a little early morning rendezvous between her and Mulder? Scully couldn't decide if she found that incredibly funny or extremely annoying. "No, it's not. Well, actually, it is. Agent Mulder isn't well."

There was a pause. Then, "Anything I can do to help, ma'am?"

"No, not really." Not unless you want to go bail out the road so we can get out of here. "You said you were trying to get in touch with me?"

"Right. The hospital records of the two girls have been faxed to my office. Thought you might like to come have a look at them. Or, I could bring them over there if you want."

Scully glanced through the small opening in the door to Mulder's bed. She didn't really feel entirely comfortable leaving himâ€| But she needed a break from this room. And breakfast. She needed breakfast. Not to mention that she had to make some calls, to find out how Pendrall was doing on that tox analysis and get the status on the background checksâ€| and Mulder wasn't going to get the rest he needed if she was on the phone all day. She didn't plan on conducting all her business from within the bathroom, either.

"Sheriff, I've got a couple of other things to do, so I think I'll come to you for those records." But I have to check on Mulder first, to be sure I can leave him. "I should be there within a half an hour. If anything changes, I'll contact you."

"Sure, thing, ma'am. I'll be expecting you."

Scully thanked him and ended the phone call. She carried the phone over to the bedside table and set it there. She sat down in the chair and brushed a lock of damp hair off Mulder's forehead. He stirred and mumbled something inaudible; then his eyelids fluttered, and his eyes opened. They were unfocused at first, but when they turned on Scully, the corners of his mouth turned up in a weak imitation of a smile.

"Hi, Scully," he whispered.

She smiled. "Hi. How are you feeling?"

He seemed to consider for a moment. "Itchy."

"I'll bet." She got up and got him a glass of water. "I want you to drink this, Mulder." She helped him to sit up. He succeeded in getting about half the water in him, and the other half on him. She watched him as he slumped back against the pillows.

"Did you stay here all night?" he asked. His voice was a little stronger now, but still quite hoarse.

"Yeahâ€| After you missed the end of my story, I was too depressed to go back to my own room," she teased.

He smiled sheepishly. "You could finish it nowâ€|"

She shook her head. "Winters wants me to come go over to his office and pick up the information from the girls' hospital stays. Unless you need me to stay here."

"Why, Scully, I thought youâ€|saw no need toâ€|continue this investigation." It seemed an effort for him to get the entire sentence out.

"I'm not looking for evidence of extraterrestrials, Mulder. But there are still a few unexplained pieces in this case, and, while we're stuck here, I might as well check them out. Assuming you're going to be okay here by yourself for a few hours."

"Me? I'll be fineâ€|"

She eyed him skeptically. "Mulder, it just makes me more nervous when you say that." She found her thermometer. "Open up."

102.6, exactly where it was last night. Not good by any means, but at least it hadn't risen. She refilled the glass of water and set it on the table.

"Okay, Mulder, your phone is right here. If you need anything â€" anything â€" call me. If not, I'll be back soon. Anything you want before I go?"

"Anything, Scully?"

She didn't like the look in his eye. "Don't press your luck, Mulder."

He closed his mouth and blinked at her innocently. She laughed and stood up, taking her gun but leaving the medical bag. "I'll see you in a little while, Mulder. Try not to get into any trouble."

"Aw, come on, Scullyâ€| How much trouble could I possibly get into like this?"

8:43 AM

Monday

The Red Robin Roadside Motel

He was just drifting off into a light doze when the phone rang. Scully couldn't have been gone for more than fifteen minutes, and she was calling to check up on him already? Jeezâ€|

He reached for the cell phone on the desk and turned it on. "Mulder."

No response. The phone rang again. \*What the hell?\* He checked the phone, and it claimed to be on. Another ring. He turned the phone off and set it back on the table, lifting his head to look around. Another ring. Coming fromâ€|

The room's phone. \*Duh.\* He stretched his arm and grabbed the receiver, feeling a little silly that he didn't realize it sooner. "Mulder," he identified himself again.

"Remember me, Mr. Mulder?"

The mysterious caller who had sent them on this little trip. "I remember the voiceâ€|but I can't quite recall the name."

The man chuckled softly. "Nice try. But I would like to meet with you. I have something to give you."

Mulder was already pushing himself into a sitting position. "When and where?"

He sat on the edge of the bed, pulling on his shoes. Scully was going to kill him. \*But not if I make it back here before she doesâ€|\* Okay, so it was a long shot. But he was going to try anyway. Maybe if he got caught, he'd just tell her he was sleepwalkingâ€|

He stood up and everything spun around him. Taking slow deep breaths, he waited for it to pass. When it finally did â€" leaving everything steady but feeling just a bit off-balance â€" he put on his coat and headed for the door. He slipped his hands into his pockets, and his fingers brushed against the small piece of foreign material. \*Have to get that analyzedâ€|\*

He stepped out into the rain, and the door closed behind him. It was just as he heard the faint click of the lock that he remembered that he didn't have a key. \*Dammitâ€| Scully's really going to kill me.\*

Mulder headed for the rendezvous point, moving as quickly as he could. That would be all he needed â€" for Scully to drive by and see him. Or worse yet, for the sheriff to drive by and offer him a rideâ€|and be delivered to her in a police car like some truant kid being taken home to his mother. The rain ran down the back of his neck, a deliciously cooling feeling against the heat of his skin. He had to concentrate on putting on foot in front of the other. He itched his side without thinking.

After what seemed like forever, Mulder reached the garage fence. The man on the phone had said that he wanted to meet him at the "drop-off point." He looked around, but there was no one in sight. Leaning heavily against the fence, he waited.

"Don't turn around," the voice behind him said.

Mulder opened his eyes, but did as instructed. He wondered how long he had been standing there. Had he dozed off standing up? "Okay, I'm here," he said, spreading his open hands to his sides to show that he held no weapon. "What do you want?"

The voice sounded nervous. "If you turn around, I'm goneâ€|"

"I'm not going to turn around," he assured him. His head was pounding mercilessly, and his legs felt like they were unsure as to how much longer they planned to support him. He wished he was back in bed.

"You don't have much time. The secrets are being covered up, maybe as we speak. You have to hurry." His tone was urgent.

"What secrets are we talking about? And what does this have to do with my sister?"

"You've already found some of the puzzle pieces. But they're going to be taken away if you don't do somethingâ€|" There was the sound of fabric rustling, then he said, "This is for you."

A hand dangled a long gold chain over his shoulder. Attached to the chain was a gold heart locket. Mulder's breath caught. He remembered that locket. "Samâ€|" he whispered.

The wind twisted the locket and he got a glimpse of a stylized "S" engraved on the back. A wave of dizziness washed over him, but he fought to hold on. "Where did you get this?"

"I knew Antha. She used to come in every Saturdayâ€| She asked me to give that to you. She said it was from Samantha."

Mulder felt like throwing up. He swallowed hard against the bile rising in his throat. "She asked for \_meâ€| She said my name?"

There was silence for a moment. "Mr. Mulder, you don't have much time. Soon it'll all be goneâ€|"

The man broke off when Mulder grabbed his arm. "What? What will be gone? Who the hell are you? What is all this?" His voice was shaky and weak, and he didn't know how much longer he could stay on his feet. But he put all the energy he had left into the grip on the stranger's thin wrist. "Tell me!"

Silence. Mulder turned to face the man, to see who it was he was speaking to, but before his eyes could fix on the face, something hit him upside the head, hard. He felt his fingers unwillingly relax their hold just before everything faded to black.

3:31 PM

Tuesday

County Hospital

White ceiling. White walls. Artificial light mixing with filtered sunlightâ€| He struggled to sit up, but a restraining hand on his chest stopped him. He turned his head and saw Scully sitting in a

chair next to him. But he was reasonably certain that this wasn't the motelâ€|

"Whereâ€|?" His throat was so dry.

Scully, bless her heart, seemed to sense it, and she helped him drink some water before he could even try and force the words out.

Replacing the cup on the table, she sat down again and took his hand. "You're in the hospital. You've been unconscious for over 24 hours."

He looked down at himself, seeing the white hospital sheets and the IV running into his arm. He turned back to her, trying to clear his mind of the fuzziness that seemed to be shrouding his thoughts.

"Howâ€| how'd we get here? Did it stop raining?"

"The wind and rain slowed down enough so that a helicopter could get through, and you were airlifted to the hospital. Just like you, Mulder, to have to do things in the most grandiose wayâ€|"

He checked; she was smiling. \*Maybe she won't bring upâ€|\*

"Speaking of the trouble you've causedâ€| What in the world possessed you to get out of bed and go wandering?" \*Damn.\* "You're lucky we found you so quickly, or you might have added hypothermia to your list of ailments."

She wasn't smiling any more. And there was something that he was forgetting, something that he should have â€"

"The locket. Do you have the locket?" he croaked.

She looked a bit taken aback by the insistence in his voice, but she reached into her pocket and produced the locket. "We found it in your hand."

He took it from her, holding it tightly. He could feel tears start to well up, but he wiped them away with the back of his hand. He was so tiredâ€| "Samâ€| he mumbled.

"Sam? Mulder, where did you get that?"

"The manâ€| from the phoneâ€| He gave it to me. From Antha. From Samâ€|"

Scully frowned. "Slow down, Mulder. Who does this belong to?"

He was trying so hard to make this all understandable to her, but his tongue felt like a wad of cotton in his mouth. "It's Sam's. Sheâ€| she gave it to Anthaâ€|" He closed his eyes, but forced them open again. "So tiredâ€|"

Scully was running her fingers through his hair. The rhythmic motion was so soothingâ€| His eyes closed. "It's okay, Mulder," she said softly. "We can talk about it laterâ€|"

9:12 AM

Wednesday

County Hospital

"But, Mulder, that locket could have come from anywhereâ€|"

Mulder shook his head. He was sitting up, propped against a mound of pillows. He still felt like hell, and Scully had warned him that he wouldn't get out of here for another week, most likely more, but some of the fuzziness was gone, and he had managed to eat something. Not much, but something. He resisted the urge to scratch an irritating spot just under his left knee.

"Mulder, it could have come from the corner drugstore."

He flinched. "Scully, don't you understand? It could be a fakeâ€| but it could also have really come from my sister. And if there's even the slightest chance that she's still aliveâ€|" His voice broke, but he forced the rest out. "Well, I have to hang on to that."

Scully took his hand, sympathy etched into her face. "Okay, Mulder." She said finally. "I can accept thatâ€|"

The nurse came in then, to check his status, and Mulder silently thanked whoever was listening for the interruption. Scully sat back and watched as the nurse buzzed around him. She waited until the woman had left before saying, "There's something else."

He looked at her. "What?"

Scully got up, and moved to the window. She had her back to him, her arms folded across her stomach. "The toxicology samples. They're gone. Pendrall had a break-in at the lab just before the tests he was running had been completed. He wasn't there, and nothing else besides our stuff seems to have been taken. He didn't have much of a chance to study the samples, but he did say that it looked to him like nothing he'd ever seen beforeâ€| And the hospital records show that both girls died of complications resulting from severe dehydration."

Mulder scowled. Mr. Mulder, you don't have much time. Soon it will all be goneâ€| "Can you get another sample from Morgan Carmichael's body?" he asked, already anticipating the answer.

Scully didn't move from the window. "She was buried yesterday. Her parents refuse to cooperate with our investigation any further."

"We could get permission to dig the body up without their consent. Both bodies."

She turned back to face him. "Mulder, no one else has been reported missing, and no other bodies have been found. There is no reason for us to look any further into this." He could tell that she didn't like the loose ends any more than he did, but she wasn't going to fight it without solid evidence. "It's over."

"No, Scully, there's something here, something that has been covered up. Darlene Alamond knew, I saw it in her eyes. Morgan Carmichael was painting abstracts of extraterrestrials before her death. And Antha Woodâ€| Antha Wood knew about me." He could tell by the look on her face that he was starting to sound a bit hysterical, and he tried

to slow down, to explain it all. "What about the motel background checks? Everyone checked out, didn't they?"

She hesitated, then sighed. "Yes, Mulder. But that doesn't meanâ€|"

"It means that we're not just dealing with some drifter here."

"It doesn't mean anything, Mulder. This person might have made camp at the edge of town until he was ready to move on. Or he might have lived there, right in town. In fact, we have a suspect to back up that suspicion." He looked at her questioningly, and she said, "Jonathon Meyrt, though we've already discovered that that's not his real name. The skinny man from the dinner, remember? He disappeared Monday."

\_She used to come in every Saturday. \_The feeling of a bony wrist in his grasp. "That was him, Scully. The man who called me, the one who gave me the locketâ€|

"Are you sure?" He nodded. "That still doesn't mean that there's some kind of conspiracy going on here, Mulder. Probably just some sick man playing on the kindness and innocence of a small townâ€|not to mention on your trust."

"Scully, there is something here. And he knew about it. Maybe he was even killed for it. But he wanted to help me uncover the secretsâ€|" \_You've already found some of the puzzle pieces. \_He pushed the sheets aside, moving slowly to swing his legs over the edge of the bed. He felt the tug of the IV in his arm.

"Mulder, what are you doing? Lay back down."

He couldn't put up much resistance when she gently pushed him back, lifting his legs onto the bed and covering him again. The little movement had set his head pounding. "Scully, my coat. Get my coat."

She looked at him quizzically but moved to the closet where his clothes were being kept. She returned with his muddy trenchcoat. "In the pocket," he whispered.

She reached into his coat pocket and came up with his cell phone. Mulder shook his head slightly. "Other one."

Scully dug around in the other pocket, then frowned. "Mulder, there's nothing there."

He closed his eyes. They'd done it againâ€|let him get so close, just close enough that he was about to reach out and touch them through the many layers of darkness and shadowâ€| And then they snatched it all away again. He was so tired, so sick of all the lies and false hopes and game playing. Scully said something to him, but he didn't catch it. He didn't want to talk anymore, to explain, to try desperately to convinceâ€|

He just wanted to sleep.

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